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ABSTRACT

The practice of criticism of speech communication is advocated, defined, and developed on societal and practical, functional grounds. Although the author concludes that there are few direct societal benefits from criticism of speeches, he does find extensive research writings that center on analysis of rhetorical phenomena, primarily public speeches of prominent figures. In defining speech communication criticism, the author includes the broader study of nonverbal communication modes as well as the more narrow traditional study of words. Rhetoric is defined as a "rationale of instrumental, symbolic behavior." The author concludes that by studying how verbal discourse influences rhetoric, the critic of speech communication can investigate other systemic or symbolic environments. (CH)

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Speech-Communication Criticism:

No Statues...Yet

A position paper presented to
The Central States Speech Association
Minneapolis, April, 1973

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by

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Years ago, a graduate classmate of mine remarked that although he had studied on three continents he believed that no town, state, or country had ever built a statue to honor a speech critic. I was reminded of his remark when I heard Sam Becker's Convention statement several years ago that we could erase all the scholarly work completed in our field in the last five years and no one would notice.[1] I tend to agree, but only in part.

Unless my experience is quite different from yours, I continue to find my non-academic friends believing that a "speech" course involves students standing up and giving speeches; "criticism," to them, consists of a teacher telling a student what he or she did wrong. Many of my academic friends in other disciplines seem to share similar views. Most of us have served on doctoral committees and felt uneasy when the committee member from outside the department innocently says, "What do you folks do in speech criticism?" But the naivetè is understandable.

If some activity is important to society or, if enough people think it important, we can usually read about that activity in our better newspapers. Have you ever noticed, though, that the New York Times has writers and critics

CS 500 233

for art, bridge, chess, dance, education, food, gardens, home improvement, and so on down to weather? The Times does not have a writer or critic for speech-communication.

In answering one part of the question posed by our panel chairman, "What is the function of speech-communication criticism in terms of our society?" -- my response is patterned after that of Gorgias of Leontini"

> There is no societal function of speech-communication.
>
> If there is a societal function, it isn't knowable.
>
> If it is knowable, it hasn't been communicated.

Before you either nod your heads in agreement or banish me for cynicism, let me note that my assignment calls for a description of what is, not what ought to be. So far as I can determine, there is not much of a societal function for philosophy, or history, or classics, or literary studies, or many of the fine arts. I would wish it otherwise, but I must describe what is, not what ought to be.

Part two of my assignment -- describing the function of speech-communication criticism in our discipline -- is a happier task.

As with Part one allow me to preface my description with definitions. I find that more agreement than disagreement exists among scholars about the general nature of criticism.

Donald Bryant provided a useful definition of criticism in one of the addresses he gave in the Distinguished Lectures in Speech Series at L.S.U. He said:

> In any case, most of the common notions of criticism seem to involve or to imply one way or another some analytical examination of an artifact or artifacts, of some human

> transaction or transactions, toward the end of comprehension, understanding, and realization of the potential of object or event. Most notions of criticism extend also to appreciation and on to appraisal or judgment.[2]

Professor Bryant's definition provides an ecumenical umbrella under which numerous discussions of speech-communication criticism can be understood. For Hillbruner,[3] for Williams,[4] for Thonssen, Baird, and Braden, [5] for Andrews,[6] for Scott and Brock,[7] for Bryant,[8] and in published statements by all of us on this panel,[9] speech-communication criticism involves the description, analysis, interpretation and judgment of suasive discourse.

Within our discipline I see speech-communication criticism functioning in two important ways. Criticism of speech-communication functions as a method by which we learn about our discipline and as a method by which we extend our knowledge of rhetorical theory.

The learning function I see best exemplified in the dissertations completed and in the critical essays published in our journals in the past few years. If you read the titles of dissertations completed in speech in 1969 and 1970, you would find fourty-eight rhetorical analyses. The speakers studied range from President Richard Nixon to Reverend David Wilkerson, from Walter Reuther to Fidel Castro, from Thoreau and Fulbright to Wilkes and Wycliff.

These beginning scholars were learning about speech-communication by describing, analyzing, interpreting and judging suasive discourse. In undergraduate classes, in graduate courses, and in doctoral seminars, students learn about speech-communication by writing critical papers. Within the last three years our national and regional journals have published, by my count, 112 articles that I would classify as speech-communication

criticism.[10] The objects of this criticism have been primarily the oratory of politicians and statesmen -- Senator Edward Kennedy, Winston Churchill, Senator Muskie, Lincoln, President Nixon, John Quincy Adams, William Pitt, and Vice-President Agnew. Discourses of ministers and militants, secessionists and suffragettes have served as focal points for critical essays. Clearly, speech-communication criticism functions as a method by which we learn about our discipline. Philip Wander and Steven Jenkins re-emphasize this observation when they stated:

> The purpose of writing criticism is to share a world of meaning with other human beings. What is shared is not merely the evaluation of an object, but a way of ordering the universe... Criticism, at its best, is informed talk about matters of importance.[11]

After the Wingspread Conference and the publication of The Prospect of Rhetoric,[12] speech-communication criticism, not unlike the white horses in Plato's Phaedrus, was given freer rein and wider compass than before. You recall that the committee on Rhetorical Criticism defined the subject matter of criticism as, "any human act, process, product, or artifact which, in the critic's view, may formulate, sustain, or modify attention, perceptions, attitudes or behavior."[13] No doubt, many in our discipline consider this definition, if not licentious, then certainly one of the greater sins crying to heaven for vengeance. Personally, I consider this definition a long overdue legitimating statement by which speech-communication criticism can function as a method by which we extend our knowledge of rhetorical theory. Without this definition I doubt very much that our journals would print the exciting and theory-extending essays of Parke Burgess[14] or Herb Simons[15] or Karlyn Campbell.[16]

But, before you can either agree or disagree with my premises that speech-communication criticism functions as a method by which we extend our knowledge of rhetorical theory, you will need to know what I understand by the term, rhetoric.

Rhetoric for me,under the partial influence of Donald Bryant, is a rationale and a rationale is a set of statements that describe, explain, and clarify the controlling principles of a specified phenomena. One doesn't taste a rationale, one understands it, or applies it, or uses it to make something. But it is the principle underlying the product, not the product itself.

What then, is rhetoric the rationale of? Departing from Professor Bryant, rhetoric, for me, is the rationale of instrumental, symbolic behavior. John Bowers and I have explained this definition in our book, The Rhetoric of Agitation and Control[17] but let me supplement that explanation here.

This definition certainly includes the "speech act" on which Professor Marie Nichols focused her remarks in her Chicago address last December.[18] It includes Professor Karlyn Campbell's definition of rhetoric as "persuasive discourses, written and oral, that alter attitudes and actions,"[19] and it includes Professor Arnold's notions of rhetoric as expressed in Public Speaking as a Liberal Art.[20] This definition intentionally goes beyond verbal discourse. Why? Because ideas are adapted to men and men to ideas with instrumental symbols and symbol systems in addition to the symbol system of words.

The ancients recognized this fact. Pericles' Funeral Oration was but a small part of a three day ceremony filled with symbols of offerings, processions, special coffins, and specified burial ground.[21] Demosthenes made his greatest speech on the issue of whether he deserved a non-discursive

symbol, a crown of laurel.[22] Roman generals used verbal symbol systems in exhorting their troops to valorous acts and in lauding their victory. These same generals, according to the historian, Polybius, also used another symbol system of rewards, i.e., a spear for wounding an enemy, a cup for killing an enemy, a crown of gold for the first soldier to mount the wall at an assault on a city.[23] The standards preceding the Roman Legions served not only to direct the ebb and flow of battle but as symbols of Rome itself. A triumph for a Roman general was not simply a victory parade. It was a coded system of symbols indicating, among other things, the relationship between the Senate and the general, the relative value of the captured booty, the relationship of the victory to the gods, etc.[24] Cicero's brother, Quintus, knew that oratory alone would not win an election and advised Cicero to gain the good will of the electorate, not only by oratory but by granting political favors to friends, knowing them by name, meeting each of the voters, not refusing invitations, and bribery.[25] According to George Kennedy, Augustus brought peace to the Empire by adding to his verbal discourse such instrumental symbols as "coins, monuments, and buildings."[26]

Now then, do I claim that funeral masks, coins, architecture, and battle flags are rhetoric? Do I claim that folk songs, arm bands, or Barbie dolls dipped in napalm are rhetoric -- ? Not at all. For that matter, I don't consider a speech as rhetoric either. A speech or any of these other items may be <u>products</u> of rhetoric -- but they are not <u>rationales</u> of instrumental, symbolic behavior. The only way to discover these rationales is by critical study of artifacts which do alter attitudes and actions. In discussing criticism as argument at the Hayward Conference in Rhetorical Criticism, Wayne Brockriede clarified this process of discovering the

rationales of rhetoric. He said:

> The function of a third type of criticism is to relate one's analysis of a rhetorical transaction to some general concept or set of concepts for the purpose of making a contribution to an understanding of rhetoric itself...it may aim at increased confidence in our present knowledge about rhetoric, or it may aim at a refinement of that knowledge.[27]

The critic of speech-communication, then, drawing on the accumulated and accumulating knowledge of how verbal discourse reveals and reflects rhetoric is in excellent position to study other instrumental symbol systems. In this way, I believe, criticism of speech-communication functions as a method by which we extend our knowledge of rhetorical theory.

Although there apparently are no statues built to honor a speech-communication critic, I am unwilling to conclude that there never will be. When critics extend rhetoric to a state where, in McKeon's terms, it can "function productively in the resolution of new problems and architectonically in the formation of new inclusive communities,"[28] then, I predict, some statues will be built.

Footnotes

[1]Quoted and extended by David Smith, "Communication Research and the Idea of Progress" Speech Monographs. 39 (August, 1972), 182. I wish to extend my appreciation to Rita Alvis who, as a research assistant, has helped me with this project.

[2]Donald C. Bryant, "Rhetorical Dimensions in Criticism," lecture given in the 38th Annual Series of Distinguished Lectures in Speech, Louisiana State University, 1972.

[3]Anthony Hillbruner, Critical Dimensions: The Art of Public Address Criticism. (New York: Random House, 1966).

[4]Donald E. Williams, "The Rhetorical Critic: His Raison D'Etre," The Southern Speech Journal, XXXVI (1970), 110-114.

[5]Lester Rhonssen, A. Craig Baird, and Waldo Braden, Speech Criticism (2nd ed., New York: Ronald Press, 1970).

[6]James R. Andrews, A Choice of Worlds: The Practice and Criticism of Public Discourse, (Evanston: Harper & Row, 1973).

[7]Robert L. Scott and Bernard L. Brock, Methods of Rhetorical Criticism: A Twentieth Century Perspective, (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

[8]Op. cit.

[9]Cf. Marie Hochmuth Nichols, Rhetoric and Criticism, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967); John F. Wilson and Carroll C. Arnold, Public Speaking as a Liberal Art, (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1964); Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, Critiques of Contemporary Rhetoric, (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1972); and, G. P. Mohrman, Charles Stewart, and Donovan J. Ochs (eds.), Explorations in Rhetorical Criticism, (University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania Univ. Press, 1973).

[10]The criteria by which articles were considered practical criticism: if they dealt with specific rhetorical material (i.e., speeches) or with the rhetorical elements of works such as pamphlets, etc.; if they dealt with rhetorical processes -- debates, newspaper series, etc.; if they attempted to contribute to our understanding of criticism without using a specific piece of discourse as their primary focus.

[11]Philip Wander and Steven Jenkins, "Rhetoric, Society, and the Critical Response," The Quarterly Journal of Speech, 58 (December, 1972), 450.

[12]The Prospect of Rhetoric: Report of the National Developmental Project, edited by Lloyd F. Bitzer and Edwin Black, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971).

[13]Ibid., p. 220

[14]Parke G. Burgess, "Crisis Rhetoric: Coercion vs. Force," The Quarterly Journal of Speech, 59 (February, 1973), 61-73.

[15]Cf. Herbert Simons, "Requirements, Problems and Strategies: A Theory of Persuasion for Social Movements," The Quarterly Journal of Speech, 56 (April, 1970), 1-11; and, "Persuasion in Social Conflicts: A Critique of Prevailing Conceptions and a Framework for Future Research," Speech Monographs, 39 (November, 1972), 227-247.

[16]Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation: An Oxymoron," The Quarterly Journal of Speech, 59 (February, 1973), 74-86.

[17]John Waite Bowers and Donovan J. Ochs, The Rhetoric of Agitation and Control, (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1971), pp. 1-3.

[18]Marie Hochmuth Nichols, "Rhetoric and the Humane Tradition," paper presented to the Speech Communication Association, December, 1972.

[19]Critiques, p.2.

[20]Op. cit.

[21]Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War, II. 34.

[22]Donovan J. Ochs, "Demosthenes' Use of Argument," Demosthenes' On The Crown, ed. James J. Murphy (New York: Random House, 1967), pp. 157-174.

[23]Polybius, The Histories, VIII. 39.

[24]Cf. W. Peine, De Ornamentis Triumphalibus, (Leipzig, 1885).

[25]Cicero, Ep. 12 (Commentariolum Petitionis), in The Correspondence of M. Tullius Cicero, edited by Robert Tyrrell and Louis Purser, (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1969), I. 155-176.

[26]George Kennedy, The Art of Rhetoric in the Roman World, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1972), p. 382.

[28]Richard McKeon, "The Uses of Rhetoric in a Technological Age: Architectonic Productive Arts," in The Prospect of Rhetoric, p. 45.

[27]Wayne Brockriede, "Rhetorical Criticism as Argument," in Conference in Rhetorical Criticism: Commended Papers, edited by Alice Grace Chalip (California State University, Hayward, 1972), pp. 3-4.